

Baltic Americans Remember Heritage,

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BALTIMORE—Ask Kestutis Laskauskas, a Lithuanian American, why he's going to Washington this week, and his answer is unforgiving:

"Seventeen members of my family were deported to Siberia during World War II."

Laskauskas, 67, a retired technician for the McCormick & Son spice company, is one of thousands of protesters expected to descend on the capital during the visit of Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev to press demands for the independence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia from the Soviet Union.

Laskauskas, who still speaks with the accent of his native country, came to the United States in 1949, among the thousands of officially designated "displaced persons" who fled their homes during the wartime chaos.

"My father and I, we took just a couple of suitcases and left" Lithuania, he said, ending up in a simple but adequate displaced persons camp in southern Germany after the war.

From there, he said, they finally were able to come to the United States. "We came with the hole in the shoe and no money," he said.

Now he is among the estimated 1 million Baltic Americans of Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian background in the United States, clustered in tight-knit ethnic groups centered mostly in the country's larger metropolitan areas from Chicago to Baltimore and Boston to Los Angeles.

The bitter memories of Soviet occupation and deportations, as well as the flight to camps and the final journey to America, have forged strong bonds among Baltic Americans.

"In one sense, they are very fond memories," said Estonian-born Maida Kari, of Gaithersburg. "We established friendships that have lasted to this day . . . The negative aspect comes in because you knew you left your homeland and



you wanted to get back, but the world situation didn't permit it."

Lithuanians are the largest segment of Baltic Americans in this country. Most of the Lithuanian Americans in the Middle Atlantic states are in Maryland, where there are an estimated 38,000 to 40,000, most of them in Baltimore and in Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

Despite dispersion from their original inner-city enclaves to the suburbs, many cling together through ethnic associations, schools, churches, newspapers, radio programs, a telephone information hot line and various dance and choral groups.

In Baltimore, they gather at the cavernous Lithuanian Hall on Hollins Street in an area called Little Lithuania, though many of its families have scattered to the suburbs. At the hall, a hubbub of Lithuanian and English fills the air as men and women meet to plan a dance or festival and hoist an occasional toast

with the traditional Lithuanian drink, *viryta*, a honey liqueur.

The hall also houses a Lithuanian library and a museum, the latter a collection of amber carvings, jewelry, painted eggs, tapestries and wayside crosses.

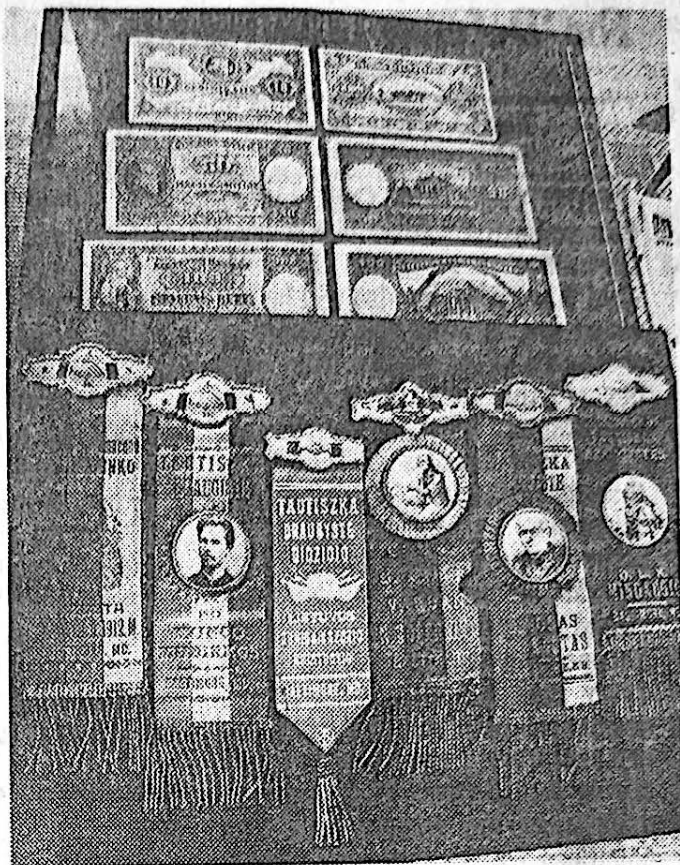
"All this helps to keep our heritage alive," said hall manager Aldona Buda, 57.

A few blocks east on Saratoga Street stands St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, where every Sunday at 8:30 a.m. the Rev. Antanas Dranginis conducts a Lithuanian language Mass. On Saturdays, teachers conduct Lithuanian language classes at the church for children of second- and third-generation emigres.

Baltimore's Lithuanians also keep in touch with relatives in the old country by telephone and letter, and occasionally travel there when the political climate allows.

But perhaps the most unifying factor is a pervasive distrust of the Soviet government and even the

Plan Demonstrations



PHOTOS BY FRANK JOHNSTON—THE WASHINGTON POST

The Lithuanian Hall in Baltimore houses a museum of Lithuanian heritage. At left, Elena Okas, left, Aldona Buda and Kathy Grintalis display Lithuanian dolls from the museum. Above, Lithuanian money and medals. Buda says the museum keeps their heritage alive.

pre-Soviet czarist government, whose occupations of Lithuania during much of this century triggered wave upon wave of flight to America.

It is that same distrust that triggered this week's planned demonstrations in Washington against Gorbachev and in support of the breakaway state's recent declaration of independence.

"I don't think we can trust him," said Audrone Pakstys, head of the Washington area chapter of the Lithuanian-American Community, despite recent indications that Gorbachev may grant Lithuania sovereignty in two to three years if it drops its independence declaration. "We feel the negotiations have started, but it will be very, very hard for the Lithuanians to give up the declaration of independence" as a condition of the talks.

"Lithuanians by nature are independent," said Remigijus Balciunas, 44, a Baltimore accountant.

"Historically, Lithuanians have

been Catholic, hard-working people," said Onile Sestokas, 36, a doctor and mother of 3-year-old twins. "The Soviet view does not encourage the Lithuanian way."

Many Latvian and Estonian Americans share the Lithuanian's distrust of Gorbachev.

"He is not the hero that everybody thinks he is," said Ojars Kalnin of the Rockville-based American-Latvian Association.

"He's still the occupying power of the Baltics," said Estonian-born Mati Koiva.

As for the demonstrations, they will focus not only on Gorbachev but on President Bush, who some Baltic Americans say has not come out strongly enough for independence.

"We're reminding both Gorbachev and the Bush administration to just say yes to independence," said Sandra Aistars, public relations director of the Joint Baltic-American Committee in Rockville.

A variety of joint and separate

Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian demonstrations, vigils and wreath-laying ceremonies will be held in Lafayette Park and the Ellipse near the White House, at the Capitol and other locations throughout the week.

The largest gatherings are expected to be Lithuanian protests at the Capitol at noon on both Friday and Saturday, when organizer Pakstys says 5,000 to 6,000 demonstrators are expected.

About 1,100 supporters of independence gathered yesterday at Lafayette Park for a demonstration sponsored by the Joint Baltic-American Committee.

But for events later this week, organizers say scores of buses are being chartered from New York, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore and other ethnic Baltic American centers.

"The people feel very strongly," Pakstys said.